

The Erasure of Dulcie September

In the wake of struggle narratives that solely glorify men, black women, and particularly in this instance, coloured women have been exiled, forgotten and erased.

In South Africa, like most countries that have experienced conflict, "soldiers at war" is often the only narrative that emerges and that is told. The face of war has always been a binary one.

The struggle for independence against colonialism and apartheid, for example, has predominantly had a male face. Even during times of conflict, masculinity dominates with the collective romanticising of the "war hero" — the image conjured in our minds is that of a man. Regardless of the struggles, hardships and violence they face, women's lives could never compare — in the media and historical narrative — to the horrors of the battlefield.

The notion of war being a solely male domain ignores women who are just as much on the front lines of battle, as well as the women who remain and not only defend their homes but simultaneously raise children and hold together a semblance of normality within their communities. In the aftermath of war, all the leadership, all the sacrifices, all the achievements of women are erased and she, yet again, is reduced to an accessory to a man.

Dulcie didn't even get that mere acknowledgement because she didn't conform/embody the traditional gender defined and stereotypical life-style of what a woman is supposed to be and do in society. She didn't stick to the script and couldn't even be reduced to an accessory to a man because she had none.

In the aftermath of sacrifices, suffering and saving there has been no truth-seeking, transparency or justice for women of colour and specifically for what black and coloured women have endured. When looking at Dulcie, we aren't even presented with an opportunity to ensure that we undo this representation of women as objects of history. The retelling of her story gives us an opportunity to shame those who have insisted that African women have made little to no contribution to the continent's intellectual history and emancipatory struggle.

The dire need to record Dulcie September's life is imperative as it will underpin the work of memory done individually and collectively by accounting one's history in order to make sense of oneself in the current moment, This most important for the coloured communities in SA, more especially women.

Simone de Beauvoir's critique in her 1949 book *The Second Sex*: "representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with absolute truth." Beauvoir, an eminent French feminist writer, philosopher, and activist of the 20th century, exposes the inseparable interconnectedness of gender power dynamics and the issue of cultural amnesia.

By prioritizing male accomplishments, female accomplishments become collateral damage. This approach to recording history must end. Denying acknowledgment of female achievements leads to cultural and individual identity loss. By diminishing their legacies, society reduces women to mere "ghosts." In general, inadequate female representation in history derives from a patriarchal social construction that accredits the primary powers in our system to men, be it economic power, moral jurisdiction, political guidance, or social privilege.

Fixing the past starts in the present. Resolving and preventing cultural amnesia can only be achieved with the help of prominent spokesmen and women. Women are essential characters in history. To disregard this fact is to disregard a basic principle: credit must be given where credit is due. If women and young girls continue to believe false or incomplete narratives, then achieving a fair and inclusive society will only be a pipedream rather than a tangible goal. Without open dialogue, progressive education, and major structural changes, future generations will continue to suffer from amnesia.

The unwillingness to engage with and actively rectify the plight of black women has set the precedent for how women of colour have been treated in South Africa. In a country that celebrates and memorialises some questionable, if not entirely contemptible, male figures in South African history, we are sure to see little of this memorialisation for a woman that fought for the freedom of herself, her community and this country like Dolcie September.

As we engage in the festivities and dialogues of Freedom Month, we must remember the monumental sacrifices Dolcie September made toward the realisation of freedom for all South Africans and, more specifically, the invaluable contribution she made toward the emancipation of coloured and by extension, Black women from the brutalities of a racist and patriarchal society.

Her story and her struggle mirror that of many women of colour in South Africa today who have picked up the baton for justice and continue her fight for freedom and equality. Her story is our story, and much like her, we refuse to be overlooked, silenced and erased.

Whenever women are not reduced to objectification, they are not considered at all. Consequently, this gender-biased view triggers an avalanche of pervasive issues. Notably, it generates a society built by and for men. Negative consequences from this approach range from causing women to experience discomfort to putting their lives in danger.

The erasure of women is dangerous. If we don't know that women were responsible for or contributed to the things like struggle, scientific breakthroughs or defining pieces of art, how do we teach young women that they too can strive to do the same? How does the coloured community begin to engage with their lived experiences and challenges so as not to repeat them?

In the aftermath of sacrifices, suffering and saving there has been no truth-seeking, transparency or justice for women of colour and specifically for what black and coloured women have endured. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) fell short, not only in acknowledging the violence and the type of abuse black women endured because they were black/coloured and women, it also failed to account for the violence black women faced at the hands of a racist, brutal state that targeted women of colour with tactics of violence stemming from patriarchal beliefs that women are somehow subhuman; that sexual violence against women is legitimate.

“The erasure of one woman in history, is the erasure of all women throughout history”- BC Seabe.

When one is faced with an opportunity to learn from the past in order to shape a better future, archives play a central role in better understanding the present. What then happens when even those archives that we draw life lessons from are incomplete or worse yet, deliberately erase women who achieved more in their time, than merely being accessories to men.

Understanding the role that erasure has had on the legacy and selfless sacrifice made by Dulcie September presents us with an opportunity to correct narratives but most importantly re-write the history of our struggle against apartheid to reflect the truth. Following the September Amnesia Instagram live conversation and panel discussion hosted by the Nelson Mandela Foundation, as a black radical feminist who strives to ensure that women, regardless of their creed and ethnicity, are remembered and embodied in our everyday activism, the story of Dulcie's assassination brings to the fore an old African proverb that speaks to the fact that “until the lion has his own story teller, the story of the hunt will always glorify the hunter”.

The erasure of Dulcie September reinforces the fact that patriarchy has time immemorial dedicated and dictated how our history is told and remembered. It reinforces the fact that patriarchy continuously and unashamedly brands the struggle as masculine, as men-centred, as brawn. It is in the unpacking of Dulcie's legacy that lives on in her family and in the truth of her unwavering principles that we are presented with an opportunity to learn, grow and be better.

As local government elections are fast approaching, the Nelson Mandela Foundations Dulcie September traveling exhibition at its Centre of Memory in Houghton gives us an opportunity to cast our votes keeping in that our freedoms came at a price that many people lost their lives to secure. It presents us with a moment to reflect on the aspirations and hopes that many female activists who did not live to see the free South Africa gave up their lives for.

Dulcie's life reminds us that stories must be told, or they die, and when they die, we can't remember who we are or why we're here. Mark Turner challenges society when he argues that narrative imagining — story — is the fundamental instrument of thought. Moreover, on how rational capacities depend upon it because it is our chief means of looking into the future, or predicting, of planning, and of explaining. Thus, the imagining of Dulcie by her family, through letters, documentaries and exhibitions forces us to actively work against her erasure and to begin to ask the important questions about our own society and the democratic transition.

The genuine pursuit being undertaken by the Nelson Mandela Foundation with support from Dulcie's family reinforces the fact that there isn't a stronger connection between people than storytelling. The panel discussion gave us an opportunity to engage in work being undertaken by various stakeholders in memory of a woman that many young people in the country today did not know about. Through constructive conversations we are able to engage around the remedies to a gender-imbalanced society. Delving into Dulcie's story has made it clear that giving credence to remarkable female figures, supporting women-led projects, and celebrating recent achievements of women provide opportunities for women to take up space in our cultural memory enabling their relentless efforts to take shape and truly impact the way our future unfolds in order to change the world's perception of women.